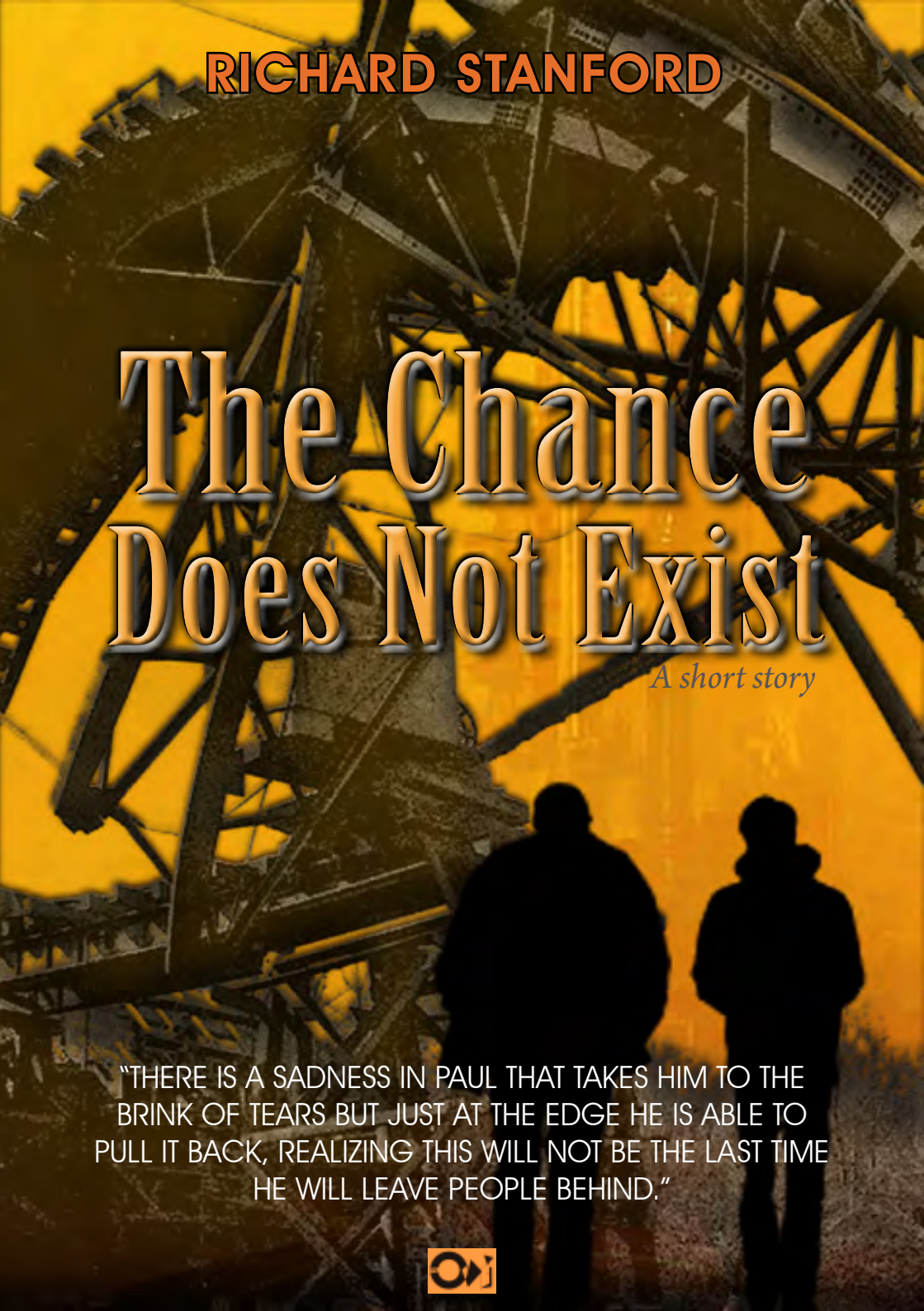
RICHARD STANFORD
The Chance Does Not Exist
A short story
"THERE IS A SADNESS IN PAUL THAT TAKES HIM TO THE BRINK OF TEARS BUT JUST AT THE EDGE HE IS ABLE TO PULL IT BACK, REALIZING THIS WILL NOT BE THE LAST TIME HE WILL LEAVE PEOPLE BEHIND."

Richard Stanford

The Chance Does Not Exist

A short story

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
© 2022 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: submissions@ovimagazine.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the writer or the above publisher of this book.

Regardless of the hobos or the rats or the ghosts, today will be their very last chance to find out what is in that hat factory. Every day for the past three years they have walked past the hat factory, daring each other to be the first to enter. But there was always somewhere else to go, some lame excuse like school, homework, dinner or I Love Lucy. Paul joins up with Matthew at the corner and together they head west along the railroad tracks. With a skip-and-step on the blackened rail ties they pass through the aromas of formaldehyde, paint, steel filings and coal smoke secreting from the factories along the tracks. On this morning more than any other, the only world Paul and Matthew want to see is the inside of the Borsalino Hat Company factory, the last factory in the line and long since bankrupt. There was neighbourhood gossip about hobos sleeping in the place, of rats, of rotten floors, and even of some ghosts. "Maybe the ghosts of hats passed, like Christmas," Paul once said. Paul

loves ghosts. This is the last day of school and tomorrow Paul and his parents are moving to a place that Paul can't even spell.

The sting of formaldehyde fades to the smells of fresh fish and sweet apples as the boys run down the rail bed slope to de Maisonneuve Market alive with the vendors unloading their trucks and wagons, and setting up their stalls with a full palette of colours from the cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, squash, oranges and flying apples. That's what Mario has tossed to Paul and Matthew just about every spring and summer morning for the past few years. Paul's apple steals a perfect arc through the rays of the hot June sun. He catches it with a silent snap of his left hand. Because of the permanent shadow cast by the slow curve of the brim of Mario's brown felt fedora that he wears every day, Paul has never seen the man's eyes, only his smile. "So, you go tomorrow?" Paul nods, polishing the apple on his sleeve. "Then, I save money on apples, no?"

Paul shrugs. "They were just falling out of the sky."

"Ah, others will fall on you. You still do not know where you're going?"

Paul points lazily south. "Somewhere off the island …that way."

Matthew pulls Paul away by the elbow, "It'll be good to get rid of him."

"Good-bye, Mario. Thanks for all the apples," Paul shouts

back. They run across Ste. Catherine Street with the sun at their backs.

School passed that day. There will be nothing that Paul will remember of it: not a teacher, not a door, not a word - just the sweating wait for the final bell. As soon as it strikes, Paul and Matthew run north to the Borsalino.

"This is our last chance," says Paul looking at the factory from the rail bed. Sitting atop the four-storey building is a huge black water tower. On cold nights Paul could always hear the metal straining in the wind, holding his breath while waiting for the moment when the tower would crash to the ground. No wind seemed able to do it.

"Ghosts just don't exist," said Matthew. Paul likes that. He needs Matthew's bravado, his indifference to danger to get him through the front door and into the labyrinth. Matthew is two inches taller and his dark eyes and slick black hair make Paul feel he is protected by an older brother.

For years the chorus from every parent on St. Clement Street has been: "Stay away from the Borsalino". They never said that about La Tortue nightclub down on Ste. Catherine Street where the drunks staggered out every night singing out-of-tune then getting sick on the sidewalk. There was no reason to tell the two twelve-year-olds to stay away from La Tortue. The hat factory was different. That's why Paul wanted in. "I'm ready."

They run down the slope, through the rusted chain-link fence and slow to a confident walk as they approach the building. From a distance Paul had always assumed the brick was

black but as they come closer he sees a dull redness breaking through the layers of soot. They jump up to the loading dock and Paul tries to open the steel doorway. Whether it was the rust of the years or a very durable lock, it does not give. Paul leans over the edge of the dock, "The others are probably the same." He peers up, following the line of the fire escape, "Up there."

"Will it hold?"

"I weigh 85 pounds and you're not much more. C'mon," says Paul pulling on the steel cable. As soon as the steel ladder hits the ground, Paul starts up. Matthew takes a deep breath and follows him.

At the first floor there is another steel door. Paul tries the handle. Nothing gives. Matthew watches Paul heading up to the next floor, his feet soft on the metal grate, his pace effortless. Without hesitation, he climbs higher, his back arched forward, his hands lightly touching the grate ahead using them to push away. Matthew falls behind, checking each step before placing his full weight while Paul is flying up the stairs. "Have you done this before?" Matthew shouts out.

Paul reaches a fourth floor window. He wiggles his finger tips under the window frame and pulls it open. The first thing he feels is the pungent smell of stale, damp air rushing out of the window.

"How did you do that?" asks Matthew.

"Why would anyone lock a fourth floor window?" Paul bends his legs over the ledge and delicately his feet touch the

solid wooden floor. He gazes around, quickly realizing that the first bit of neighbourhood gossip is false: the floor is not rotten and although there is a layer of dust over the shine, it is stable and perfectly flat. Paul walks forward, growing sure of the floor, while scanning the huge room that melts into darkness, cut only by steel pillars that hold the ceiling ten feet above. He looks back at Matthew leaning in through the window. Now he feels like the older brother. "C'mon. No ghosts yet."

Matthew climbs over the ledge, looks around with wide eyes and slinks forward. They walk slowly through the expanse. "I've never been in a place so big before," says Matthew.

"I have and just as flat. De Lormier Downs to see the Royals. The grass was soft. The infield didn't have a bump on it. But it was nothing like this. This is amazing. You can play baseball in here but it would have to be all ground balls."

As they move forward they see in the faint light what appear to be lumps on the floor. Paul stops, leans forward, trying to discern the lumpy abstractions into a form he knows. He moves slowly to his left in an arc around them, his feet silent on the floor. Matthew can't hear him and his movement reminds Matthew of his cat stalking a window sill. Paul moves closer, finally coming to a stop at a lump: a wool newsboy cap. Paul opens the inside of the cap with a brush of his hand and puts it on. Suddenly he jumps up, shouting, "Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Robinson homers in the ninth!"

Matthew finds a patchwork Ivy cap. He glances up at the inside as if daggers are sticking out and lowers it onto his

head. He kicks his left leg off to the side then his right leg, trying to find a step that might suit him. "I'll buy one of your stupid papers. I need a good laugh."

Paul walks up to Matthew, "Two bits." He tip-toes around the Ivy and newsboy caps scattered on the floor, making his way to a large cardboard box resting against the wall. He looks inside. "Wow". He reaches in and pulls out one hat after another, tossing them to Matthew: porkpies, straw Panamas, Trilbys, and brown felt fedoras. One of these, Paul holds like a prize. He turns it around and around, admiring every detail – the gentle curve of the brim to the front, the perfect valley of the centre dent, the warm texture of the felt, the silkiness of the grosgrain ribbon binding the base of the crown. It doesn't matter to him that he is just a kid who will look ridiculous walking down the street wearing it. He's keeping this fedora. He places it on his head but it drops down to his eyebrows. He peers up from under the brim and raises his head high: "All right mister, just gimme the facts, nothin' but the facts."

Matthew has donned a porkpie hat and drops to his knees, gripping his hands as if in prayer: "Please Sarge, gimme a break. I didn't do it, honest."

Paul gently pushes Matthew to the floor with his foot. "Ah, you're nothin' but a little punk. Beg, I say, beg for mercy."

"No way," says Matthew jumping to his feet. They toss the two hats aside and reach into the box, taking out whatever comes next. Matthew fits a Panama on his head, Paul a Trilby. "I say, old chap, how dare you insult me," says Matthew

with an accent that sounds more like Texan than the British he attempts.. "We'll hang you from the gallows and then have a cup'a tea."

"You're kind of cold-blooded," says Paul turning the Trilby around to the left and to the right. He places it on his head tilted to one side, then two-foot shuffles across the floor while singing: "Give me that old soft shoe, I said that old soft shoe/ Ah-one, ah-two/ Ah doodle-dee doddle-dee do/ Play me that old soft shoe and nothin' else will do/ That's the dance Bojangles used to do..." "Bravo! Bravo!" comes an echoed voice from the far end of the factory. Paul and Matthew freeze, ready to run for it. "Molto bene!" the voice coming closer now with applause, "Perfetto! Perfetto!" A smile grows larger as a sharp ray of sunlight crosses Mario's beaming face. "You have found me," Mario says striding by the boys. He flicks on a light switch and hangs his coat on a wall hook. The light reveals a small area at the corner of the building with a simple table and chair, a mattress on the floor, a night table, a trunk, and a bicycle leaning up against the wall. There are several books staked on the trunk held upright by a bowl of apples.

Paul collects his senses. He is afraid of what Mario might do. "I'm sorry, Mario. We didn't know...you..." Mario shrugs, "My name is hardly on the front door, which...is part of the idea." Mario removes his fedora and for the first time Paul sees the sparkling green eyes full of mischief. Is Mario the hobo that everyone talks about? But he isn't a hobo. He's the fruit and vegetable man, the flying apple man, the smile man. How could he be a hobo man? Wait a minute. Mario

could be the ghost that only Paul believes in. But he has a witness this time, who looks just as scared as he does. "Do you live here?"

"Si, I do."

Matthew has the idea. "Maybe your name is on the front door. It's Borsalino."

Mario shakes his head. "Ah, out of the mouths of babes. No, I am no Borsalino. Next, you think maybe I'm the Cosa Nostra?"

Paul approaches the living area, taking in the warm simplicity. "But why?"

"I am sure one day you will understand this."

"Try me," says Paul defiantly.

Mario watches the boy, how his eyes wander over everything, regarding every detail like a hawk hunting in the airstream. "Let us just say that sometimes selling vegetables is not enough with which to build a house of one's own. But I never have a problem for food. Or hats."

Paul stops at the bowl of shiny apples. "You don't have a home, do you," Paul says with certainty.

"Si. This one."

"And your family?" asks Matthew.

"Brindisi, Italia. And please, I consider you my friends so I ask that you not tell anyone, such as your parents? There are some who would not understand...this. Please."

Paul stops his wandering and turns to Mario. He looks deep into Mario's eyes, so magnetic to him after all this time. "We'll never tell anyone about it, will we Matthew."

"I'm as dumb as a stump."

Mario smiles. "Thank you. You should go now. Your parents will worry."

Paul nods to him, picks up his brown fedora on the floor and with Matthew walks towards the open window.

"You don't have to leave that way, you know. There are stairs over here."

"No thanks," says Paul. "It's more fun this way." Matthew climbs through the window to the fire escape. Paul is about to follow him when he sees Mario walking towards him with an apple in his hand. He tosses it to Paul and he snaps out of the air as always. "You already gave me one for today."

"That is for the next chance."

Paul and Matthew walk along the railway line towards St. Clement Street with the late afternoon sun beginning its final descent. For the first time in all the years they have known each other they say nothing. There is a sadness in Paul that takes him to the brink of tears but just at the edge he is able to pull it back, realizing this will not be the last time he will leave people behind, this will not be the last time he will feel such silence. They arrive at Matthew's house and after exchanging a couple of brave slaps on their shoulders, and the promise to keep in touch, Paul walks away knowing this will never happen. He looks back for a final wave but Matthew

has disappeared into the rest of his life.

Tomorrow Paul will leave this place and the entire stench that surrounds it. He is glad about that. But when he glances over to the hat factory and imagines Mario sitting alone in the darkness of the top floor, he wishes he had not waited so long. He promises himself that the next time he will not be so cowardly. He continues along towards his home, places the oversized fedora on the back of his head so it will not cover his eyes and gently tosses the apple straight up in the air.

THE END

The Chance Does Not Exist

Richard Stanford

February 2022

Ovi magazine
Design: Thanos

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
© 2022 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: submissions@ovimagazine.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the writer or the above publisher of this book.

RICHARD STANFORD

The Chance Does Not Exist

A short story

"THERE IS A SADNESS IN PAUL THAT TAKES HIM TO THE BRINK OF TEARS BUT JUST AT THE EDGE HE IS ABLE TO PULL IT BACK, REALIZING THIS WILL NOT BE THE LAST TIME HE WILL LEAVE PEOPLE BEHIND."

Richard Stanford, When I'm not writing short stories and essays or producing documentary films in Montréal, I can be found mucking about in my gardens trying to create the perfect eggplant.